

At the Intersection of Hope and Despair: Korea's Uncertain Trajectory in the 1980s

A Senior Project
presented to
the Faculty of the History Department
California Polytechnic State University – San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

By

Haley Cole

June, 2019

Abstract:

The 1980s in South Korea were defined by political factionalism and constant protest. The brief ecstasy afforded by the assassination of the dictatorial president Park Chung Hee in 1979 gave way to disillusionment with the policies of his successor, Chun Doo Hwan. Throughout Chun's term, he sought to subvert popular perceptions of his authoritarian illegitimacy he earned through the bloody military coup with which he obtained power. Chun hoped to justify his presidency within the contexts of 1) the 1987 presidential election, wherein the country would witness its first peaceful transfer of power in the post-war era, and 2) the 1988 Seoul Olympics, which were to be hosted by South Korea for the first time in the country's history. Chun attempted to use these two events to both threaten and placate his opposition throughout the decade. In my examination of this period, I will dissect Chun's addresses to the nation in order to understand how he unsuccessfully sought to divert the blame for social division and unrest to pro-democracy demonstrators throughout the decade. I will also illustrate that, through the demonstrators' unyielding tenacity in the face of Chun's policies of suppression, aided by the pressures of international attention ahead of the Olympics, Chun's dissidents successfully achieved democratic concessions from his administration ahead of the 1987 election.

Introduction

“Could there ever be another moment in modern Korean history where hope and despair intersected more extremely and violently?”

-Chon Sang In¹

As a titan of modernization to his supporters, a strictly oppressive villain to his opposition, and, as of October 26, 1979, a deceased ex-president of newly industrialized South Korea, Park Chung Hee left a contentious and complicated legacy. Vested in his passing laid the culmination of the hopes and fears of the Korean people; and it was with this mixture of optimism for the future and knowledge of the past’s potential for repetition that they entered the 1980s. Park’s death marked the end of his often draconian Yusin or October Restoration period (1972-79) wherein he seized authoritarian power over the nation in the name of rapid modernization, and the beginning of what was tentatively called the Spring of Seoul.² In that way, the start of the decade would be decisive for the Republic of Korea’s trajectory as a newly modernized nation and, at its best, had the potential to justify its people’s long history of struggle against captors both foreign and domestic.

Amidst this optimism, their next dictator, General Chun Doo Hwan, seized power in 1980 under martial law and military leadership.³ The opinions Korean citizens held, and currently hold, about Chun’s capabilities as a leader are practically unanimous. While debates over Park Chung Hee’s legacy continue to be raised, the collective memory of Chun’s tenure remains saturated in resentment.⁴ As recently as March of 2019, Chun was under arrest for allegations of

¹ Chon is a Korean citizen reflecting on being a college student at the beginning of the 1980s. Quoted in Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 48.

² *Ibid.*, 177.

³ Harold C. Hinton, *Korea Under New Leadership: The Fifth Republic* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 56-63.

⁴ Daniel Tudor, *Korea: The Impossible Country* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 89.

defamation against the victims of the infamous massacre which occurred in response to the Kwangju Uprising.⁵ Chun's regime is perceived as intrusively repressive and dysfunctional by historians of the period, as he adopted the suppressive policies of Park without the stipulation of rapid industrialization and economic boom to accompany them.⁶ As the underbelly of his corrupt term continues to be revealed year by year,⁷ his presidency remains an important topic in the study of Korean modern history and the country's disorderly path to democracy.

In his inaugural address given on September 1, 1980, Chun echoed the sentiments which had been repeatedly expressed by Korean citizens in the wake of Park's assassination:

As I see it, the opening of this decade represents a crucial turning point in the course of our modern history in both domestic and international spheres [...] All of us in contemporary life share the historic mission of boldly parting with the climate of the past to build a clean, just society in mutual trust, secured by a strong and prosperous welfare state.⁸

Chun was correct in interpreting the importance of the new era and the significance it had for Korea's trajectory as a nation. However, despite proposing a "turning point" in Korean history, his words were devoid of meaningful action. Later in his address, he went on to virulently oppose the corrupt nature of politicians who had impeded Korea's matriculation into democracy in the previous decades in favor of personal gain.⁹ Retrospectively, these assertions seem ridiculous amidst the numerous cases of embezzlement, corruption, and bribery now associated

⁵ "Gwangju District Court to distribute tickets to attend trial of Chun Doo-hwan," *The Hanyoreh*, March 1, 2019, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/884163.html.

⁶ Kelly Jeong, "Narratives of Nation Building in Korea," Lecture at Yonsei University, Seoul, July 31, 2018; Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 392.

⁷ Steven Borowiec, "South Korea's ex-dictator Chun Doo-hwan tries to keep low profile in his twilight years," *LA Times*, November 29, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-south-korea-dictator-20151129-story.html>; Cumings, 395.

⁸ Chun Doo Hwan, "A Peaceful Transfer of Power: Inaugural Address, September 1, 1980," *The 1980s: Meeting a New Challenge: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan*, vol. 2 (Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1980), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

with the Chun regime.¹⁰ While he often made sweeping statements and promises to the Korean people that he would usher in a new democratic age, the primary intention of these assurances was to placate the unprecedented number of political activists and fervent anti-government demonstrators active during his presidency. Protests were crushed with heavy handed responses by Chun's administration, who were unwilling to give concessions to the protesters, but equally unwilling to lose face ahead of the 1988 Olympics in Seoul.¹¹

The importance of the Olympics—and their utilization by Chun—cannot be understated when seeking to understand his presidency. G. Cameron Hurst III, writing in 1988, claimed that the Olympics, “served to legitimize and give focus to the Chun regime. Accepting responsibility for hosting a successful Olympic Games right after his problematic ‘rise to power,’ [...] President Chun was able to deflect criticism of his shaky legitimacy and channeled public energies into something more positive, the Olympic Games.”¹² Unquestionably, Chun sought to do just that. Through the Olympics, Chun attempted to placate the public and restore his own legitimacy. However, counter to Hurst's claims, his efforts eventually backfired as the attention the country attracted internationally ahead of the Olympics was used as leverage by demonstrators in achieving concessions on constitutional amendments. While many historians touch upon the ultimate failure of his campaigns, the opportunity for democratic success provided in the pre-Olympics moment for Korea carries with it a deep historical significance which this paper will closely examine. Historian Bruce Cumings approached the subject in a piece he wrote for the *Korea Times*:

¹⁰ John McBeth, “South Korea: The Buck Stops Here,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 142, no. 48 (December 1, 1988), 32; Mark Clifford, “The Noose Tightens: Chun Faces Probes on Corruption and Kwangju Uprising,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 141 no. 33 (August 18, 1988), 26.

¹¹ Manwoo Lee, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishing, 1990), 45.

¹² G. Cameron Hurst III, “The Seoul 1988 Olympics: Politics, Nationalism, and Sport,” in *Korea 1988: A Nation at the Crossroads*, ed. G. Cameron Hurst (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 56.

In an unanticipated irony the Olympics not only helped Korea develop and showcase itself. It also contributed to democracy. When nationwide pro-democracy protests broke out in the summer of 1987, the threat of a marred Olympics helped Chun's decision to concede and allow a direct popular vote to replace the indirect, and government-controlled, electoral college system in the election at the end of his 7-year term.¹³

Cummings' argument could be expanded: The 1988 Olympics were not just a contributing factor in Chun and Roh's constitutional concessions to the demonstrators, rather they were the impetus for social and political change necessary for the success of the pro-democracy demonstrators. From the moment Seoul won the bid to host in 1981, the Games were expected to be a watershed moment for the nation since they would provide an opportunity for them to showcase their "miraculous" economic development and set them apart from their northern neighbor.¹⁴ However, the Olympics were transformative to Korea internally in a way which transcended expectations and precipitated the successful adoption of democracy. This paper will closely examine the reasons for the escalation of protests, Chun's attempt to placate his opposition with the promise of a democratic election coupled with his threat of national humiliation ahead of the 1988 Olympics, and how those attempts failed as demonstrators grew in number bolstered by international attention.

Historians James F. Larson and Heung-Soo Park examine this topic in their 1993 work, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics*. In their interpretation of the relationship between the 1988 Olympics and its effectiveness as a catalyst of change for South Korea, they present a compelling argument for the importance of the event and how it facilitated rapid political transformations within the country under increased pressure from the international

¹³ Bruce Cummings, "Korea Came of Age with the 1988 Seoul Olympics," *The Korea Times*, September 9, 2010, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/09/117_72941.html.

¹⁴ Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 337.

community.¹⁵ I will cite their arguments and research in my section dedicated to this topic. The main contribution I make to this study is in my dissection of Chun Doo Hwan's addresses to the nation during and after this moment. While Larson and Park effectively demonstrate the trends and influences which forced concessions and political change from Chun's party, I hope to more deeply examine the language and tactics Chun used in his attempt to threaten or placate the increasing number of anti-government demonstrators active throughout the 1980s.

The tenacity of the demonstrators, founded upon a valid desire to see the country enter a democratic age, eventually triumphed over Chun's resolve to bury his misdeeds under the pretense of democracy and international esteem. The citizens who sought a better future for the nation achieved decisive results toward democracy despite Chun's repeated attempts to quell unrest. In that way, the true victories of the 1980s as a decade in Korea, and the promises that were hoped for following Park's assassination, were achieved more so through the demonstrators' successful push for concessions on the matter of constitutional amendments than the actual democratic elections or Olympic Games as Chun repeatedly proposed. This paper will examine how the promises of the 1980s were fulfilled because of the actions of the pro-democracy demonstrators despite Chun's resistance, and how Chun's threat of international humiliation ahead of the 1988 Seoul Olympics was ironically utilized against him by his opposition as an impetus for democratization.

Protest Culture in Korea

To better understand the prevalence of anti-government movements in the 1980s, it is important to first examine the context from which these movements rose. Namhee Lee, in her

¹⁵ James F. Larson and Heung-Soo Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

study of the history of social movements and protest culture in Korea, argues that disappointments of the post-colonial period gave Koreans the sense that they were passive actors in their country's history. After colonization gave way to dependence on the United States in a form of neo-colonialism, people became disillusioned with the prospects of independence they had previously idealized.¹⁶ Their lack of ability to exert influence in their country or significantly shape its future was intensified in the 1960s and 1970s under Park Chung Hee's Yusin regime. As Ryu Youngju states in his cultural examination of this period, "Yusin refers to the system of total social control that the Park regime created during the seven years in which the constitution stayed in effect."¹⁷ Park's Yusin Era fostered an intense hatred for not only his administration, but also the political structure it existed within. His iron-fisted rule was maintained with the ability to enact sweeping emergency decrees which turned the act of criticizing the government into a capital crime.¹⁸ Even in private, government dissidents constantly feared arrest for speaking against Park's regime. Hatred of the repressive Yusin Era was instrumental in popularizing the democratization movement in the 1970s. This movement would allow for the expansion of democratic yearnings to all sectors of society and eventually succeed at ushering the nation into a democratic age in the 1980s.¹⁹

As Namhee Lee concisely states, "For dissident students and intellectuals, the death of Park Chung Hee on October 26, 1979, meant the end of the era bearing the name Yusin and all of its absurdities and political terror. If the Yusin Period was the Frozen Republic, the new era was the Spring of Seoul."²⁰ During this interim moment, university students were increasingly

¹⁶ Namhee Lee, 37.

¹⁷ Ryu Youngju, ed., *Cultures of Yusin: South Korea in the 1970s* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ Namhee Lee, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

joined by citizens, specifically of the middle class, to demand a more democratic society and the discontinuation of all Yusin policies. Public frustration over the implementation of martial law which resulted from Park's assassination—and would not be lifted until January of 1981—become a central grievance which the protesters organized themselves around. By March of 1980, almost all university campuses began to see demonstrations calling for a lifting of martial law, the freeing of political dissidents, and the resignation of Chun Doo Hwan who, at that time, was a relatively obscure military leader.²¹ At the beginning of the 1980s, Korean citizens' hope for effecting societal change was demonstrated through the popularity and diverse attendance of protests as they were presented with increased opportunities to participate in voicing their dissatisfactions with the new system. The vacuum of power left by Park represented hope for the future coupled with a tense anticipation that his policies would be continued. Chun's military coup and ascension to power confirmed those fears. As historian Robert T. Oliver summarizes,

After a brief period of uncertainty, the most visible changes, and those that bore the most directly upon their lives, were not for the better but rather were shockingly for the worse. Nor were the changes of a kind over which the people had, or felt they had, any control. The democracy that they needed, and they were ever more insistently demanding, was sharply curtailed. [...] Their successor president was not the people's choice, nor was he the kind of executive they would have chosen if they could.²²

In testimony during the trial that ended in his execution, Kim Jae-Gyu, the head of the KCIA who was responsible for the assassination of Park Chung Hee, stated that he shot Park “for the democracy of this country.”²³ However, what was to result from Park's assassination would be a continuation of the denial of social and political freedoms of the Korean people. Chun's tenure would go on to be defined by the harsh authoritarianism of his rule and the shameless cases of

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²² Robert Tarbell Oliver, *A History of the Korean People in Modern Times 1800 to the Present* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1993), 310.

²³ *Ibid.*, 88.

corruption he committed with and for his family.²⁴ Upon his inauguration, Chun censored the media, fired 8,000 government employees, and rounded up 40,000 “hooligans,” among them political dissidents.²⁵ For Korean citizens, this communicated his intention to continue the oppressive policies of they had resented during Park’s regime.

In the spirit of Korea’s vibrant tradition of protest,²⁶ groups of students and dissidents became radicalized in what Manwoo Lee calls the most important phenomenon in South Korea during Chun’s rule.²⁷ These radicalized groups asserted a *minjung* (meaning “public”) ideology which professed that, since the founding of the first republic in 1948, the previous regimes in Korea had successively withheld their citizens’ ability to affect change or assert their human rights.²⁸ The central ideology of the *minjung* movement was promoting the self-emancipation of the people. That is, they refused their role as passive actors in Korean history and chose instead to promote the idea that the political and social change should be fostered by and for citizens.²⁹ The determination among radicalized student groups to end military rule in Korea was captured by one United States official, who reported, “They want the president to take a gun, put a shell in it, put it up to his head and blow his brains out. They don’t want the president to step down. They want the whole thing to collapse.”³⁰ In line with the *minjung* ideological aims, Korean students assumed the pivotal role in discrediting the Chun government, and were responsible for the country’s turn from an authoritarian regime to a parliamentary democracy at the end of the

²⁴ Ibid., 311.

²⁵ Manwoo Lee, 6.

²⁶ More on Korea’s history of protest and protest culture can be found in Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007) and Kenneth M. Wells, *South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

²⁷ Manwoo Lee, 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Namhee Lee, 2.

³⁰ Manwoo Lee, 7.

decade.³¹ It was the joint efforts of the opposition's political parties and the *minjung* practitioners which created a more effective and organized opposition to Chun's regime when compared to the less effective opposition forces which existed during Park's regime.³² As Namhee Lee argues, "Lasting over three decades under ruthless suppression by the state, the *minjung* movement produced many martyrs and heroes who gave the movement its moral authority vis-à-vis society and the government."³³

The implementation of martial law would set the tone for the 1980s, a decade defined by political strife and social unrest. Throughout his presidency, Chun would make many attempts to discredit and implicate protesters for the divided state of the nation. 1980 is an especially important year when seeking to understand the popularity of democratization movements through the decade. On May 18 of that year, the expansion of martial law to the entire country left the streets empty and communicated a defeat of the previously successful attempts to rally citizens behind the cause of the radicalized students. The protests which took place in the city of Gwangju in the South Jeolla Province began as unremarkably as any of the others, as university students began to demand political reform as soon as the new academic term started in March. The Chun administration's level of suppression for this particular instance made it an event of unmatched importance for the Korea democratization movement. According to Namhee Lee, the massacre which resulted from administrative overzealousness to quell growing protests was the experience which "overdetermined every aspect of the *minjung* movement in the 1980s."³⁴ In the next section, I will examine the Gwangju Massacre and its resounding implications to the cause of democratization and Chun's presidential image.

³¹ Namhee Lee, 1.

³² Manwoo Lee, 7.

³³ Namhee Lee, 294.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

Gwangju

From the beginning of his ascension to presidency, Chun's tenure was stained by illegitimacy. No argument could justify the violent military coup he utilized in his rise to power.³⁵ Officially obtaining office on September 1, 1980, Chun greatly misjudged the democratic mood of the nation and, seeking to solidify his political power and restore order, closed down universities, imposed political censorship of the press, and detained all the major political figures.³⁶ As Manwoo Lee argues, "Never in the history of Korea's constitutional development did the people disapprove so overwhelmingly of the manner in which Chun's military government came to power."³⁷ Protests grew in popularity across the country, especially among college students. The protests of Gwangju resembled demonstrations occurring across the country. However, the uniquely unforgiving response by Chun's administration made the weeklong massacre a watershed moment for Korean democracy.

If only one event could have been said to have irrevocably marred Chun's tenure as president, it was the Gwangju Massacre. Still today, it remains almost synonymous with the failures and disappointments of the Chun regime. If people were expecting to be ushered into a new era of relative freedom after Park Chung Hee's assassination, Gwangju was the pivotal moment those hopes were dashed. In a response to the gathering of unsuspecting protesters in Gwangju, 30,000 riot police and 3,000 special airborne troops untrained in dealing with student demonstrators were dispatched on to the Southern Jeolla province. In the process, ordinary citizens became implicated in the fighting as they strove to push the military presence out of the

³⁵ Manwoo Lee, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

city. Citizens who were not a part of the original demonstrations eventually took up arms when they lost friends and family to the brutalities of the massacre, wherein upwards of 200 people died.³⁸ The citizens of Gwangju became martyrs for the cause of democratization.³⁹ However, since many of those citizens were not necessarily fighting against the military presence in their city because they were interested in promoting democratization, but rather because they had become implicated throughout the week as the military continued to suppress and brutalize the people around them, the memory of their deaths remains a point of contention.⁴⁰ Regardless of their motivations, their deaths would be heralded as a sacrifice by protesters and remained an impetus for democratization throughout the coming decades.

Gwangju gave a new imperative to the cause of the anti-government demonstrators, and student protesters were imbued with a new sense of urgency. The shock of Gwangju made students feel as though they had to be willing to die for the cause of democratization. As one student writer at the time stated, “Modern Korean history cannot move even one inch further before overcoming Gwangju of May 1980.”⁴¹ Guilt over the inability to prevent the massacre, or stomp out the last embers of the Park regime, led many students to feel as though the situation was so severe that they had no choice but to join in on the cause. In fact, “the self-reproach for being unable to commit oneself to the movement led one Seoul National University student to throw herself into the Han River in 1986, blaming herself for being ‘cowardly and insecure.’”⁴² This tragic instance is representative of the intense pressure students were under to participate in demonstrations. Later in the decade, as I will examine, Chun’s threats toward activists and

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Namhee Lee, 55.

⁴⁰ Gi-Wook Shin, *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), xix.

⁴¹ Namhee Lee, 54.

⁴² Ibid., 53.

attempts to suppress political dissidents failed. The sense of urgency and total commitment to the cause which encapsulated these student movements can be understood as one facet which made their steady growth in popularity throughout the decade so certain. In order to give meaning to the senseless deaths of the Gwangju Massacre, demonstrators were wrought with a new imperative to challenge Chun's regime, making the event pivotal for the country's democratization.

The feelings of hatred towards Chun and his regime were only to worsen over the years as he continued to breach the freedoms of the Korean people, but as historian Bruce Cumings argues, the touchstone of protest was always Gwangju and the American reaction to it.⁴³ The legacy of the Gwangju Massacre would have a profound effect on the pressures that Chun would endure until the end of his presidency and long after. In that way, Korea's path to democratization cannot be grasped without the Gwangju Massacre and the intense responses of disbelief and anger which followed it. The continued perception of the Massacre as an effective force for change were communicated in a 1996 survey, wherein 46.5 percent of non-Gwangju Korean people believed Gwangju to be "the Mecca of Korean democratization."⁴⁴ It is due to this importance that Namhee Lee argues, "The entire 1980s and its visions for the future were not imaginable or possible without Gwangju."⁴⁵ As Chun continued to fight his image of illegitimacy, the Massacre would remain a shadow over his regime. Importantly, the tensions between Chun's government and the Korean people after the events of Gwangju made his promises and threats to the protesters ineffective. As Chun attempted to move past the Massacre and shift blame to his opposition, the weighty indebtedness students and protesters felt to the

⁴³ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 389.

⁴⁴ Gi-Wook Shin, xxix.

⁴⁵ Namhee Lee, 49.

victims of Gwangju would continue to give meaning to their cause throughout the decade. This was a major reason that Chun's threats and attempts to challenge the popularity of the democratization movement were ultimately unsuccessful.

Chun's Implication of Dissidents in the Postponement of Democracy

At the time of Chun's inauguration, he boasted a lengthy military career, but virtually no political experience. Prior to his coup and ascension to office, he was in charge of the Defense Security Command, which was responsible for military counterintelligence. This was his promotional reward for demonstrating competence in analyzing and countering North Korean infiltration tactics as a commander.⁴⁶ Chun's experience in the military could not make up for his lack of political capability; and, despite demonstrating a willingness to learn the intricacies of politics, this would weaken his ability to manipulate and maintain authoritarian power when compared to Park Chung Hee, a more seasoned political veteran. This made his attempts at maintaining order comparatively flimsy, and became another negative aspect of his illegitimate image. On the day of Park's death, October 26, 1979, the army was divided, and part of it evoked the possibility of liberalizing the regime.⁴⁷ However, on December 12, Chun carried out a surprise military coup with definitive success. As demonstrations continued in the streets, Chun reintroduced undisguised military leadership and continued Park's policies of repression.⁴⁸ In this section, I will examine how Chun attempted to capitalize on the growing popularity of pro-democratization movements during his inauguration, as well as movements calling for an end to martial law, and attempted to manipulate their discourse in order to meet his own authoritative

⁴⁶ Hinton, 57.

⁴⁷ Eric Toussaint, "South Korea: The Miracle Unmasked," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 39 (2006): 4211-4219.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

needs. In his desire to manage and control the increasingly restless population, Chun resorted to intimidating his opposition in order to gain the legitimacy he sought. He often used the promise of democratic reform to threaten his opposition, arguing that the cause of democracy could only be obtained once the right conditions were met in the country. For Chun, those conditions were obedience to his regime.

As he stated in his September 1, 1980 inaugural address, “If true democracy is to be rooted in this land, the political climate must first be improved. A climate fraught with agitation, irrationality, factionalism, intrigue, irregularities, and corruption, as was the case in the past, can scarcely nurture democracy.”⁴⁹ Devoid of meaningful action, Chun often attempted to present his presidency as a break with the corruption of earlier regimes, as is the case throughout his inaugural address. This is revelatory of his desire to capitalize on the negative perceptions of previous regimes in order to contradict the perception that his own was illegitimate. He echoed popular public sentiments about the corruption of Park’s regime by stating, “Sheer selfishness became the prevalent way of thinking. Honest, faithful, and industrious citizens, far from gaining the respect and acceptance they deserve, were treated as eccentrics.”⁵⁰ By expressing frustrations with the administrations of the past, Chun sought to appeal to the overwhelming dissatisfaction with Park in order to grant legitimacy to his own presidency. He then stated, “This land belongs to the nation of the people who preserved it with their blood and built it with their toil. It is not the nation of a privileged few. Therefore, in the 1980s we ought to shake off the residual ills of the past and construct a genuinely democratic welfare state.”⁵¹ In co-opting the language of his

⁴⁹ Chun Doo Hwan, *The 1980s, Meeting a New Challenge II: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan* (Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1981), 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

opposition, Chun unsuccessfully presented the illusion that Korean citizens would be more politically involved during the Fifth Republic.

Additionally, Chun criticized past presidents for prolonging their terms in office. Park was guilty of this, often using the guise of national emergency to maintain his power. One constitutional amendment Chun made upon entering office was his promise to resign after one term. Through his writings, it becomes clear that the purpose of this amendment was as an attempt to garner the trust of the people for his regime. He emphasized the importance of a peaceful transfer of power in a 1984 address, when he stated,

The definition of democratization may be long and complex, but for us who have lived through traumatic controversies over protracted rule, a peaceful change of power is the essential ingredient. It was in this context that we established the institutions of democracy, what remains is for us to adhere to the system faithfully.⁵²

Here, Chun seemed to conflate the promise of a peaceful transfer of power with making significant reforms toward effecting democracy. He attempted to grant his regime the airs of democratic progress by making it impossible for him to serve more than one term in office. Harold C. Hinton, writing in 1983, offered a tentative appraisal of Chun's regime, stating, "He has publicly criticized the length of Park's tenure and to all appearances has made it impossible to serve more than one presidential term [...] but, distrusting the factional tendencies of Korean politicians, will make no effort to ensure he is succeeded by an acceptable replacement."⁵³ While Hinton acknowledged that limiting himself to one term was a positive element of Chun's presidency, his statement still communicated a distrust of the South Korean political system.

⁵² Chun Doo Hwan, *The 1980s, Meeting a New Challenge III: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan* (Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1984), 263.

⁵³ Hinton, 93.

This is reflective of larger perceptions of Chun's illegitimacy, and the ineffectiveness of his attempts to validate his rule.

Chun repeatedly alluded to the 1987 election which would end his term as a catalyst through which his political atrocities could be forgiven and the country's new democratic era would be realized. In one passage of his 1984 "New Year Policy Statement," Chun stated, "It will be an honor and the fulfillment of a dream to start the precedent of a peaceful transfer of power to one who will be elected with popular support in a constitutional election. More importantly it will be a significant milestone in our political history."⁵⁴ Through this statement the reader is able to ascertain Chun's motivations behind his constant references to the 1987 election, and what he saw as its ability to placate the public and solidify his political power for the remainder of his term. As his term progressed, Chun continued to insist that he was committed to the cause of democratization, citing the 1987 election as proof of his dedication. However, he contradicted this claim throughout his presidency as he refused to consider the desires of his opponents.

Throughout his addresses, demonstrators and protesters were presented as the foremost threat to the achievement of democracy. Again, in his 1984 "New Year Policy Statement," he emphasized that "A tendency to care more about changing the system than its proper operation will cause extreme anxiety about the health of democracy. To achieve a peaceful change of administration, it is imperative to reject non-peaceful means of achieving political ends."⁵⁵ Here, Chun rejects "non-peaceful" means of achieving democracy, alluding to the growing number of protests and demonstrations occurring in response to the inefficiencies of his regime. In

⁵⁴ Chun Doo Hwan, *Towards Peace with Justice: New Year Policy Statement* (Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1984), 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

presenting himself as a proponent for democratization, he attempted to implicate his opposition in the process, blaming them for the chaotic state of the nation and the delayed fulfilment of democratic achievement. Hoping to utilize the promise of the 1987 election as a means to the end of dissent and resistance, Chun insisted, “The conflict-laden climate of the old era has disappeared [...] The energies that once were wasted on confrontation must now serve constructive ends. The sense of resistance once harbored by some intellectuals, students and youths must become a creative passion for the dawning era.”⁵⁶ These vague statements had little purpose but to threaten the anti-government protesters and present the illusion of a new more democratic era under Chun’s regime. Here, again, Chun insisted upon his regime’s legitimacy by drawing comparisons to past regimes.

Chun also spent an extensive part of his national addresses portraying the demonstrators as threats to democracy which must be dealt with through questionable means. For example, he proposed that, “Agitation succeeds when rational politicians are disregarded and public popularity becomes the chief goal of politics. It is thus crucial to create a political climate making agitation impossible.”⁵⁷ In this statement, the president avoided all responsibility for national unease and instead placed blame on the demonstrators. In that way, this source exemplifies a key argument utilized repeatedly by Chun, which is that the demonstrators were obstacles in the way of the democratic country Chun was pretending to represent. Chun’s thinly veiled threats continued well into the decade, and in 1986 he stated, “Should we ever fail to take advantage of this historic transition period and spoil our broad opportunities, we will not only

⁵⁶ Chun, *Meeting a New Challenge II*, 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

fail to leap into the developed world but will suffer the bitter frustration of sliding back into stagnation or an even worse condition.”⁵⁸

By claiming that protesters were impeding the path to democratization, Chun demonstrated the pressures he was under to address and make efforts toward promoting democracy in the nation. He did this largely through his references to the 1987 election and his promise to step down after one term. However, as his term progressed, the popularity of protests only continued to grow as demonstrators refused to passively accept Chun’s abusive actions as president. In the apology given at the end of his presidency, he references his inauguration and the promises he made, stating, “When I was inaugurated as president I believed that prolonged one-man rule and corruption among those in power were cancerous elements for the democratic development of the country.”⁵⁹ Even in his apology he puts on the airs of an innocent democratic leader selflessly seeking democratization. His opposition, however, realized that Chun would not usher in a new democratic era. As the decade progressed, they continued to mount pressure on his administration to achieve the constitutional amendments they sought.

The Unprecedented Importance of the 1988 Olympics for South Korea

For Chun’s regime, the 1988 Olympic Games were an opportunity to showcase the rapid economic progress of South Korea which had occurred under Park Chung Hee’s regime as well as a chance to differentiate themselves from the DPRK by portraying their citizens as fulfilled participants in a modernized nation. Successfully hosting the Olympics meant international validation for the nation and was coupled with the expectation of a significant boost in

⁵⁸ Chun Doo Hwan, *Challenges and Triumphs at the Crossroads at Development: New Year Policy Statement by President Chun Doo Hwan* (Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1986), 13.

⁵⁹ Manwoo Lee, 156.

international interest in the country which, for so long, had existed in the shadows of its neighbors, Japan and China. After winning the bid over Japan—their former colonizer—despite the residual Cold War threats of North Korean attack, Koreans were by most accounts ecstatic to be able to showcase their nation’s modern advancement.⁶⁰ For Chun’s regime, successfully hosting the 1988 Olympics would be an opportunity to showcase the “miracle on the Han,” meaning the rapid economic development of the country which had taken place over the past decades.⁶¹ Bruce Cumings compares the significance of the 1988 Olympics in Seoul to the 1964 Olympics in Nagoya, stating that, “just as the 1964 Olympics brought Japan’s economic prowess to the world’s attention,” the importance of the success of Seoul’s Olympics to Chun’s government cannot be understated.⁶² Well aware of the transformative effects of the 1964 Olympics in their ability to benefit Japan’s post-war development, his administration was determined to emulate their success.⁶³ In this section, I will examine the historical significance of the 1988 Olympics in South Korea and what it meant to Chun’s regime.

Chun believed that the Olympics, along with the elections of 1987, had the power to legitimize his presidency and channel the public’s energy into something other than anti-government demonstrations.⁶⁴ In 1987, Chun stated that the “Seoul Olympics and a peaceful transfer of power in 1988 are major, significant tasks on which our national progress hinge.”⁶⁵ This belief is reflected by Chun’s “3S policy,” which he had been utilizing since the beginning of his term as president. Through the “3S policy”—relating to ‘sex, screen, and sports’—Chun

⁶⁰ Hurst III, 50.

⁶¹ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 337.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 337-338.

⁶³ Chae-Jin Lee, “The Challenge of Democratization in South Korea,” in *Korea 1988: A Nation at the Crossroads*, ed. G. Cameron Hurst (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁵ Chun Doo Hwan, *The 1980s, Meeting a New Challenge V: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan* (Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1987).

“reduced the censorship of sexual content in films, introduced nationwide color TV broadcasts, and attempted to focus the nation’s attention on the 1988 Seoul Olympics.”⁶⁶ Along with the other elements of his “3S policy,” Chun believed national attention on preparation for the Olympics would successfully detract from the growing popularity of movements demanding for constitutional revision.

In addition to his attempts at distracting the public, he also repeatedly placed the implication of national stability on citizens ahead of the 1988 Olympics and used their importance as an excuse to call on them to end their protests. He referenced the importance of presenting an orderly and united perception of the Korean people to the world when he addressed dissidents, and often included threats for the further postponement of democratization. In 1984, Chun stated,

Democracy presupposes a respect for law. We must not remain democratic in name only, disregarding the law to suit individual conveniences nor can we allow democracy to degenerate into heteronomy [...] If, in such a spirit, we further upgrade education, culture, the arts, sports and all other sectors of society, we will become a wise people who benefit from peace and justice and who have advanced the country toward the forefront of development. I am confident that we will be able to demonstrate such an image to the world when we host the 1988 Olympics, a festival of peace.⁶⁷

Here, Chun attempted to shield himself from the criticisms of his opposition to democratize the country by deflecting blame once again to the anti-government demonstrators. In his 1986 “New Year Policy Statement,” Chun called for a moratorium on debates over constitutional amendments, citing the Olympics and their paramount importance. He insisted that “the issue of whether or not to change the nation’s presidential election system ought to be debated in 1989 only after we have accomplished the urgent national tasks of setting a peaceful change of

⁶⁶ Tudor, 89.

⁶⁷ Chun, *Towards Peace with Justice*, 26.

government and of successfully staging the Seoul Olympics and only on the basis of such accomplishments.”⁶⁸ This statement outraged Chun’s opposition, who were convinced they could not obtain power under the policy of indirect elections, and resorted to mass appeal tactics such as popular petition, drives, and rallies.⁶⁹ Increased pressures from Chun’s dissidents gradually forced the government to compromise, and on April 30 Chun was pushed to change his stance toward constitution revision, stating that he would be willing to revise the constitution during his time in office.⁷⁰ Importantly, Chun’s 1986 statement demonstrates clearly his use of the Olympics as leverage to promote his political interests. By insisting that hosting the Games successfully was the most critically important focus of his regime, Chun sought to negate the sense of immediacy for democratization felt after the Gwangju Massacre.

However, on April 13, 1987, Chun would once again deliver a “blow to the democratic aspirations of the Korean people” by announcing the postponement of constitutional revision until after the Olympics.⁷¹ This meant that the 1987 election would be held under the then present constitution.⁷² Once again, Chun attempted to use the Olympics as leverage to achieve his political goals and deny the Korean people the chance at a direct election. This announcement launched the Chun government’s credibility to its lowest point, worsened by the formal nomination of Roh Tae Woo as the Democratic Justice Party’s presidential candidate on June 10, a decision that was met with massive nationwide protests and mobilized tens of thousands of demonstrators.⁷³

⁶⁸ Chun, *Challenges and Triumphs*, 23.

⁶⁹ Bushra Gohar, “South Korea: Road to Democracy,” *Pakistan Horizon* 41, no. 2 (1988): 58.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷¹ Manwoo Lee, 32.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 37.

1987: Mounting Protests and the “June Breakthrough”

Roh Tae Woo was an essential ally for Chun during his presidency, and was instrumental in the 1987 coup which ensured his rise to power. Chun’s announcement of Roh’s nomination communicated his determination to handpick his successor and retain power behind the scenes. This decision was met with backlash at an unprecedented scale to the history of the modern nation and, on June 18, 1987, eight days after the announcement of Roh Tae Woo’s nomination, downtown Seoul “looked like a warzone.”⁷⁴ In that summer, anti-government protests swelled to a fever pitch. Out of this intense hatred for the Chun regime and refusal to accept the stubbornness of his policy, the June Democratic Movement was born. The June Democratic Movement was a three-week period in which massive and effective protests took place, triggered by Roh’s nomination. Significantly, the movement was popularized by the revelation of the death of Park Jong-Chul, a Seoul National University Student, in January of 1987. Park was murdered at the hands of police while being tortured under the pretext of interrogation. After the circumstances of his death were released, a *New York Times* article asserted that the student’s death “forced the Government to admit, for the first time in a political case, that its policemen had behaved brutally. Although officials insisted that it was an isolated episode, Mr. Chun recognized that he was in trouble and had to act fast.”⁷⁵ The idea that Park’s death was an isolated incident was a transparent lie to the nation, considering that multiple similar cases had been unsuccessfully covered up by the Chun regime. The news of his murder became a magnet for anti-government activism as increasingly more citizens, workers, and middle-class people

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Clyde Haberman, “Seoul Student’s Torture Death Changes Political Landscape,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/31/world/seoul-student-s-torture-death-changes-political-landscape.html>.

joined the protests.⁷⁶ The *New York Times* reported, “For anti-Government politicians, the torture issue was a boon, grim perhaps but welcome. It offered a rallying point when they were seriously divided over how to press for changes in the way South Korea chooses its national leader.”⁷⁷ Cases like this one imbued anti-government protesters with a renewed sense of urgency. This would not be the only time a student’s death would get wide publicity and become a catalyst for social change. Lee Han Yeol, a sophomore student at Yonsei University, was struck with a tear gas canister during a protest at the university and killed on June 9. Widespread anger over his death, coupled with the resentment of Chun’s obvious attempts to maintain political power after his term through the nomination of Roh, kindled the movement which would finally succeed in winning major concessions from Chun’s government.⁷⁸

It was through the June Democratic Movement, called a “June Breakthrough” by Bruce Cumings, that the pro-democracy groups successfully pressured Chun’s administration—specifically Roh—to concede to their claims.⁷⁹ If Roh had not made his declaration of constitutional concessions, Chun would have most likely continued to defend the choice he made to inaugurate Roh without a direct election. During the height of the movement, urban areas devolved into battlegrounds. According to the *New York Times*, by June 18th in Seoul “an average of 20,660 [tear gas] canisters per day were fired in the 17-day period [...] 262 police stations and substations were attacked.”⁸⁰ At that time, the mood on the ground in Seoul communicated that virtually everyone was against the Chun regime following the April 13 declaration. One middle-aged accountant who was interviewed by a foreign reporter declared,

⁷⁶ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 392.

⁷⁷ Haberman.

⁷⁸ Min-a Lee, “Yonsei Student’s Ultimate Sacrifice Gets Due Tribute,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 25, 2005, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2587024>.

⁷⁹ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 391.

⁸⁰ Manwoo Lee, 37.

“Everyone is against this government now. After April 13, we trust nothing they say. If they promise reforms, no one will believe them. If they declare a state of emergency, they will be digging their own tombs.”⁸¹ Feelings of resentment toward Chun and his regime, strengthened by the deaths and mistreatments of college students at the hands of police, gave anti-government demonstrators the impetus to continue with the movement despite the constant threat of military suppression. At that time, international press contemplated the idea that the government may have been willing to sacrifice their national image of modernization and democratic progress ahead of the Olympics in order to take violent action against the growing demonstrations. One report warned, “If the protests continue long enough to challenge the regime's grip on power, some analysts warn that Chun or military officials could decide to sacrifice the prestige of the Olympics and presidential elections by unleashing a police crackdown that could lead to widespread bloodshed.”⁸² According to Manwoo Lee, the country came much closer to military intervention than is often realized.⁸³ The movement ended only when Roh Tae Woo, without Chun’s approval, made an announcement that constitutional concessions would be granted, and the direct election system would be adopted. After ten days of intense fighting between protesters and riot police, a definitive breakthrough had finally been achieved.

Roh’s concession demonstrated the success of the *minjung* movement and the imperative they placed on Chun’s administration to relent to the cause of democratization. During the June Democratic Movement, Roh is reported to have told a confidant that there was no other way to appease the public than to make a total

⁸¹ Pamela Constable, “Riots Raise Fear of Crackdown, Major Obstacles to Conciliation Seen in Korea,” *Boston Globe*, June 21, 1987, 1.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Manwoo Lee, 37.

concession to the opposition.⁸⁴ Presumably, Roh feared, along with all other interested parties, that Chun would continue to pursue an extension of his period of political control through the indirect election system by intensifying crackdowns on protests. Even though this outcome would have further betrayed the modern, democratic face the country had been hoping to show the world through the Olympics, Chun's singular interest in maintaining control over the country was a constant threat. Roh recognized this danger, and made the announcement of constitutional concession on June 29, 1987, which subsequently capped the June Democratic Movement.

Chun, in a statement made after Roh's announcement, admitted to the success of the democratization movement by stating, "In order to resolve antagonism and confrontations among citizens and to promote national reconciliation and unity, amnesty and the restoration of civil rights will be extensively granted."⁸⁵ Roh acknowledged the government's inability to deny the pro-democracy demonstrators their goals after the June Democratic Movement. Without widespread participation in the movement, the causes they sought might have continued to be delayed by Chun's administration. The determination of the demonstrators and *minjung* practitioners is revelatory of the ineffectiveness of Chun's earlier threats against them, and their determination to achieve major democratic concessions before Chun's term ended.

Even in his concession to the wills of demonstrators, and his address to Roh's announcement, Chun remained firm in his stance that he had always been on the side of democratization through his commitment to ending his term with the 1987 election. In response to Roh's statement, Chun maintained that he had had "an unwavering resolve to

⁸⁴ Manwoo Lee, 39.

⁸⁵ Chun Doo Hwan, "Excerpts from Speech by South Korea President," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1987, 8.

set such an example to ensure that a tradition of peaceful changes of administrations, which is the long cherished goal of the 40-year political history of the republic, will evolve and take hold in this land.”⁸⁶ Here, again, Chun demonstrated an unwillingness to accept blame for the state of social unrest in the country, even though his attempts to maintain political power through Roh’s nomination demonstrated his insincerity and ignorance to the true goals of democratization. In the next section, I will explore the main motivation for Roh’s announcement of concession, namely, the international attention given to Korea ahead of the Olympics in 1988.

International Attention as the Catalyst for Democratization

Roh’s announcement that he would concede to demands of the demonstrators and allow constitutional revisions and a system of direct election was connected to the international attention garnered by Korea ahead of the Olympics. Even though Chun had strongly refused to grant concessions to his dissenters through the decade, his efforts to threaten and placate them and were ultimately unsuccessful. As I have examined, Chun attempted to shift blame for social unrest onto protestors and insisted that they were humiliating the nation ahead of the Games. However, as 1988 approached, negative press attention surrounding the protests reported the incompetence and fragility of the Chun regime. Therefore, perceptions of his regime’s illegitimacy would be solidified by the event that he had hoped would remedy his negative image. In this section, I will analyze how the importance of the Olympics to the Chun and Roh regimes became a catalyst for democratization.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Through the Olympics, Korea had the ability to present itself positively to the world after decades of political turmoil and rapid modernization. For the first time since the Korean War, their country would be the subject of major international interest and attention. In the United States, people's understandings of Korea in the late 1980s largely relied on perceptions they had held since the Korean War. Exacerbated by Korea's impoverished and war-torn depiction in media portrayals, such as those in the popular television show *M*A*S*H*, the Olympics were seen as a "coming out party" for Korea's rapid economic development over the previous decades.⁸⁷ For those who had lived under the harsh conditions of Park Chung Hee's rule, the silver lining of rapid modernization provided an opportunity to promote a more positive image of Korea and Koreans to the world. The rapid economic development of South Korea made their ability to host the Games successfully a matter of international interest. There was also an element of competition with Japan, their former colonizer. One *Newsweek* article from 1988 reported, "They [the South Koreans] hope this Olympics will do for them what the Tokyo Games did for Japan in 1964: showcase their astonishing economic progress and increase their global stature."⁸⁸ As previously mentioned, Koreans had witnessed how instrumental the success of the 1964 Olympics in Nagoya had been for Japan's economic progress, and now could look forward to the same achievements through their successful hosting of the Games.

International press coverage ahead of the 1988 Olympics was a crucial factor which pressured Roh into concession. During his June 29 announcement, he directly referenced the importance of the nation's international presentation ahead of the Olympics as a reason for the government's imperative to concede rather than take a firmer stance on suppressing protests. Roh

⁸⁷ Kyung Tae Kang, "The National Image of South Korea as Reflected in The New York Times Before and After the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games," Master's Thesis, California State University, Fresno, 1993, 33; Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 337.

⁸⁸ Kang, 16.

stated, “Now that the Olympics are approaching, all of us are responsible for avoiding the national disgrace of dividing ourselves and thus causing the world to ridicule us.”⁸⁹ Placed in the context of granting concessions to the protesters, this statement can be read as a shift from Chun’s earlier implication of demonstrators as the sole cause of social upheaval, to Roh suggesting the role of the government in creating social strife and political division. In that way, Roh’s recognition of the government’s role in exacerbating the divided image of the country demonstrated a break from Chun’s earlier performative attempts at blamelessness.

As I have already examined, Chun attempted to quell and intimidate demonstrators with the threat of international humiliation if the country could not present a unified national image ahead of the Games; however, the population’s undying resolve to bring down the Chun regime in the 1987 June Democratic Movement demonstrated the failure of these attempts. International opinion of the nation, which Chun had continuously attempted to use as a rallying point behind support for his presidency, eventually became the impetus for Korean democratization and for the allowance of a direct election for the first time in the country’s history. Additionally, Robert T. Oliver argues that it was due to the “steady observation of the world community” that Chun kept his promise to retire from office at the end of his term.⁹⁰ The desire Chun had to continue to hold political power behind the scenes through and after the 1987 election led to the heightening of political protests, which were widely reported worldwide. Roh’s June 29 declaration “opened the way for a successful hosting of the Olympics”⁹¹ but it was the stubbornness of Chun and his regime which led to such a clear shift from authoritarianism to democracy in 1987. With Chun’s refusal to budge on the matter of constitutional amendment communicated, the popularity of

⁸⁹ Chae-Jin Lee, 15.

⁹⁰ Oliver, 319.

⁹¹ Larson and Park, 150.

protests and anti-government dissent reached a point where Roh was forced to step in in order to preserve the image of modernity they had been cultivating over the previous decade. In that way, heightened international attention proved to be a key element in pressuring Roh into concession.

The Irony of the Olympics and Chun's Refusal to Accept Responsibility

The Olympics became an impetus for social and political transformation which would shape Korea's democratic future. The popularization of protest, international pressure, and the desire to showcase the country proudly during the 1988 Olympics all successfully provided the scenario for which Korea could democratize despite resistance from Chun and his administration. Therefore, the Olympics, which were expected to transform perceptions of their country internationally and showcase the success of their rapid modernization, instead became an unexpected force for transformation domestically. As the one analyst in the business community, interviewed by the *Boston Globe* in 1987, reported, "The government miscalculated badly in its blind greed for power. They thought they could use the Olympics and the peaceful transition as an excuse to postpone democratic change, but it boomeranged [...] This week, they have definitely gotten the message."⁹² After the Games were held, international attention slowed but the effects of the Olympics and the moment of power it provided to the demonstrators effected change far beyond the successful completion of the Games.

As I have already touched upon, it is unlikely that Roh would have made the concessions to protesters had the Olympics not been pending.⁹³ Additionally, it was through the success of the June Democratic Uprising that the resolve of the demonstrators was communicated. In July of 1987, the *National Review* reported,

⁹² Constable.

⁹³ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 337-338.

Chun wanted the talks put off, he explained, until after the 1988 Summer Olympics, presumably to avoid the disruptions that a presidential election might bring. The problem was that no one believed him. The frustrated democratic forces in South Korea saw his action as just another way to remain in power. And they took to the streets. Those Olympics, so important to South Korea's international prestige, may well be the reason Chun is now backing away from a direct confrontation with the people, rather than proclaiming a state of emergency and calling out the troops. Great delicacy is called for.⁹⁴

This analysis demonstrates the irony in Chun's attempt to postpone democratization until after the successful hosting of the Olympics. His belief that the Olympics could successfully validate and legitimize his regime eventually gave way to their push for his removal and further invalidation. In his acknowledgement of Roh's June 27 announcement, Chun seemed to be acknowledging his inability to dispel negative perceptions of his regime, stating, "I clearly recognize the fact that regardless of the possible merits and demerits of a particular system, and irrespective of the preferences of any specific political parties, the general public has an ardent desire to choose the president directly."⁹⁵ However, Chun remained firm in his attempt to absolve himself of blame for the state disorder and division in the country politically and socially. He continued to defend the indirect election system in his address, maintaining that, "The direct presidential system that we had in the past led to a protracted one-man rule. Moreover, direct elections fanned regional antagonism, causing serious confrontation among citizens from different districts, as well as general social confusion."⁹⁶ However, he also referred to the public demand for direct election in a derogatory way toward demonstrators. In this address, he continued to employ language which was intended to threaten his opposition even at this late moment. He warned that the possibility of worsening political turmoil and confusion after the adoption of a direct election system would then place full blame on the demonstrators,

⁹⁴ "Olympic Stakes," *National Review* 39, no. 13 (July 17, 1987): 19–20.

⁹⁵ Chun, "Excerpts from Speech by South Korea President."

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

who had for so long fought for those concessions. He presented a bleak picture of the future of the country under the direct election system, and then explained that, since there were “no prospects for even an iota of concession from the opposition,” the consequences would be theirs to deal with.⁹⁷

At this moment, Chun continued to demonstrate his contempt for the popularized anti-government movements which had challenged his regime increasingly throughout the 1980s. When compared to his earlier threats against protesters, this address can be understood as another attempt to legitimize and validate his presidency. It also demonstrates the fatigued arguments and ineffective threats he employed against the growing number of protesters disillusioned with his regime. As I have examined, Chun’s desire to placate and threaten protesters through the Olympics was eventually overcome by the tenacity of his opposition. However, as evidenced through these excerpts of his address, he continued to express a feigned innocence even in his admission that his opposition had forced him into concession through the popularity of protest.

I will conclude my examination of Chun’s addresses to the nation with a look at his November 24, 1988 “Apology to the Nation” upon leaving office. He began the address with a purported intention of repenting for his abuses during his presidency. He claimed that, through this apology, he sought to take responsibility for “all the mistakes made by my government during my years of service.”⁹⁸ He also acknowledged outrage over the Gwangju Uprising in regretful terms, calling it “the most unfortunate event in our national history.”⁹⁹ Additionally, he admitted to accumulating a considerable amount of assets, which was not the last time his

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Manwoo Lee, 155.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

presidential misdeeds would be revealed. Despite his insistence that he was seeking to make amends for the abuses of his presidency, his apology reveals further attempts to excuse himself and shift blame. Although I will examine only a few excerpts in which he sought to achieve this belated validation, it should be understood that his entire apology is woven into the larger context of his refusal to accept full responsibility for his administration's failures.

In one instance, he referenced his lack of political experience when entering the presidency, stating "I frankly admit that those [mistakes] are the result of the trial and error of my rule. I became the head of state without any preparation or experience at a time of national emergency."¹⁰⁰ Although Chun acknowledged the failures of his presidency, he attempted to mitigate the human rights abuses he instigated and corrupt actions he engaged in by reminding citizens of his lack of experience and the tumultuous state of the nation he adopted at the beginning of the decade. Chun made his own apology invalid by his insistence on minimizing his crimes in office. He appears to have still been concerned with the perception of illegitimacy his regime earned when he took office, and communicated a lack of remorse through this attempt to garner sympathy for his actions as president. In this way, he simultaneously acknowledged the failures of his presidency while also seeking to legitimize his choices by presenting them as an inevitable result of the state of the country he inherited. Chun's apology was riddled with similar continued refusals to accept blame for his abuses as president.

In a particularly baffling example of this, Chun referenced his family's poverty as a reason he and his relatives were engaged in embezzlement and accumulated funds throughout his term. He appealed, "I asked [my relatives] many times to be prudent and sometimes I controlled them [...] My family was very poor when I was young. I was shocked and sad when my younger

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

brother was ill and died without seeing a doctor.”¹⁰¹ Here, Chun demonstrated an attempt to explain and minimize his actions. He once again refused to accept blame for his misdeeds and instead made a poor attempt to illicit sympathy for his circumstances. However, Chun understandably was not, and is not, afforded sympathy by the Korean public.¹⁰²

Chun also presented himself as somewhat of a martyr to the cause of democratization, stating, “I will wait for your judgement, deeply conscious that I may be subject to punishment, if that’s of any help to national harmony and for the just start of democratization.”¹⁰³ As we have seen him attempt throughout his presidency, he presented himself on the side of democratization. While practically the entire country viewed him as an antagonist to the democratic progress of the nation, he maintained the pretense concern toward the nation’s future political welfare. As I have explained, these are only a few of the examples of Chun attempting to grant legitimacy to his regime and refusing to accept responsibility for the failures of his administration. However, they are helpful in understanding the extent of his implication of others when answering for national issues.

Conclusion

The 1980s, which began with the ecstasy of opportunity afforded by the assassination of Park Chung Hee, gave way to the disillusionment of the Chun regime. His abuses as president solidified his legacy as a universally despised figure in Korean modern history, and his attempts throughout the decade to channel implications to his dissidents failed in the context of his

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰² Steven Borowiec, “South Korea's ex-dictator Chun Doo-hwan tries to keep low profile in his twilight years,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-south-korea-dictator-20151129-story.html>.

¹⁰³ Manwoo Lee, 157.

resounding perception of illegitimacy. Korean news outlets, regardless of political affiliation, remain critical of the Chun regime. As Aidan Foster-Carter, honorary senior fellow researcher in modern Korea at Leeds University in England said, “It’s hard to find a good word for the butcher of Gwangju.”¹⁰⁴

In 2019, as the thirty-ninth anniversary of the Gwangju Massacre approached, news outlets continued to release reports detailing new revelations into the details of the Massacre. In an article from May 15, 2019, the *Korea Times* reported that they had a new testimony from Heo Jang-hwan, a former investigator and witness to an indiscriminant killing of civilians in Gwangju, who reported, “‘I witnessed the army shooting myself,’ Heo said, adding he was sure that Chun had ordered the ‘shooting’ as an attack, not ‘firing’ for defensive purposes.”¹⁰⁵ This is relevant because the person who ordered the shooting was infamously and contentiously never revealed. While the true events which led to the atrocities of Gwangju will likely never be fully understood, articles like these demonstrate the continued interest in uncovering the abuses of Chun’s regime.

The success of the pro-democracy demonstrators and anti-government activists in achieving their goals in the 1980s is best understood through the context of Chun’s unwavering commitment to denying them the goals they sought. Their achievements and tenacity throughout the 1980s made their resistance movement one of the most successful of its kind, and fulfilled the democratic aspirations of the beginning of the decade. Korea’s rapid path to modernization, characterized by the human rights abuses of the Park and Chun regimes, culminated in the nation’s first direct election in 1987 and the successful hosting of the Olympic Games in 1988.

¹⁰⁴ Borowiec.

¹⁰⁵ Jung Da-min, “Chun Doo Hwan Ordered 1980 Massacre Shooting,” *Korea Times*, May 14, 2019, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/05/356_268845.html.

Through the popularity of protests and demonstrations, Korean citizens effectively took control of the future of their country and communicated that they would not be intimidated by the regimes which had repeatedly attempted to revoke their role as active participants in shaping the country's future. While Chun will be remembered as a president who lacked legitimacy, the demonstrators and their successful movements will be remembered for their ability to usher the country into a new democratic era despite constant suppression.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Michael Breen, "Chun Doo-Hwan: Korea's Last Dictator," *The Korea Times*, November 11, 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/02/363_99434.html.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Chun, Doo Hwan. *Challenges and Triumphs at the Crossroads at Development: New Year Policy Statement by President Chun Doo Hwan*. Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1986.

_____. "Excerpts from Speech by South Korea President." *The New York Times*, July 1, 1987. <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/01/world/excerpts-from-speech-by-south-korea-president.html>.

_____. *The 1980s, Meeting a New Challenge II: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan*. Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1981.

_____. *The 1980s, Meeting a New Challenge III: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan*. Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1984.

_____. *The 1980s, Meeting a New Challenge V: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan*. Seoul: Korea Textbook Company, 1987.

_____. *Towards Peace with Justice: New Year Policy Statement*. Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1984.

Clifford, Mark. "The Noose Tightens." *Far Eastern Economic Review* 141, no. 33 (August 18, 1988): 26. <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/208213769?accountid=10362>.

Haberman, Clyde. "Seoul Student's Torture Death Changes Political Landscape." *The New York Times*, January 31, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/31/world/seoul-student-s-torture-death-changes-political-landscape.html>.

Lehner, Urban C. "Nation in Flux: On Eve of Olympics, South Korea is a Land of Clashing Cultures --- Part First World, Part Third, it Modernizes Anxiously; Rejecting Japan Analogy --- Shamans and Semiconductors." *Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 1988, Eastern edition. <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/398128235?accountid=10362>.

Litsky, Frank. "Koreans Beam with Optimism Over Olympic Progress." *New York Times*, November 27, 1984, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/425234596?accountid=10362>.

McBeth, John. "South Korea: The Buck Stops Here." *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 142, no. 48 (December 1, 1988): 32.

“Olympic Stakes.” *National Review* 39, no. 13 (July 17, 1987): 19–20.
<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=12561993&site=ehost-live>.

“A Public Unappeased.” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 142, no. 49 (December 8, 1988): 12.
<http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/208203475?accountid=10362>.

“South Korea: Olympics.” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 141, no. 36 (September 8, 1988): 75.
<http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/208200101?accountid=10362>.

Secondary Sources:

Borowiec, Steven. “South Korea’s ex-dictator Chun Doo-hwan tries to keep low profile in his twilight years.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2015.
<https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-south-korea-dictator-20151129-story.html>

Breen, Michael. “Chun Doo-Hwan: Korea’s Last Dictator.” *The Korea Times*, November 11, 2011. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/02/363_99434.html.

Constable, Pamela. “Riots Raise Fear of Crackdown, Major Obstacles to Conciliation Seen in Korea.” *Boston Globe*, June 21, 1987, 1.

Cumings, Bruce. “Korea Came of Age with the 1988 Seoul Olympics,” *The Korea Times*, September 9, 2010,
http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/09/117_72941.html.

_____. *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

Gohar, Bushra. “South Korea: Road to Democracy.” *Pakistan Horizon* 41, no. 2 (1988): 50-68.

Hinton, Harold C. *Korea Under New Leadership: The Fifth Republic*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1983.

Hurst III, G. Cameron et. al. *Korea 1988: A Nation at the Crossroads*. Lawrence, IL: University of Kansas, 1988.

_____. “The Seoul 1988 Olympics: Politics, Nationalism, and Sport,” In *Korea 1988: A Nation at the Crossroads*, ed. G. Cameron Hurst (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press).

- Kang, Kyung Tae. 1993. "The National Image of South Korea as Reflected in The New York Times Before and After the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games." Master's thesis, California State University, Fresno.
- Larson, James F. and Heung-Soo Park. *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993.
- Lee, Chae-Jin. "The Challenge of Democratization in South Korea." In *Korea 1988: A Nation at the Crossroads*, ed. G. Cameron Hurst (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press).
- Lee, Manwoo. *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1990.
- Lee, Min-a. "Yonsei Student's Ultimate Sacrifice Gets Due Tribute." *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 25, 2005.
<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2587024>.
- Lee, Namhee. *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007.
- Nahm, Andrew C. *Korea: A History of the Korean People—Tradition and Transformation*. Seoul: Hollym International Corporation, 1988.
- Oliver, Robert Tarbell. *A History of the Korean People in Modern Times 1800 to the Present*. Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1993.
- O'Neill III, Aloysius M. "The 1988 Olympics in Seoul: A Triumph of Sport and Diplomacy." 38 *North* (February 8, 2018). https://www.38north.org/2018/02/aoneill020818/#_ftnref15.
- Pound, Richard W. *Five Rings Over Korea: The Secret Negotiations Behind the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1988.
- Rowl, Evans, and Robert Novak. "South Korea's Turn to Democracy." *The Washington Post*, November 9, 1987. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/11/09/south-koreas-turn-to-democracy/0bee41bb-7d27-4bc4-9e5c-30e5a23a5255/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cd1eb7a55948.
- Ryu, Youngju, ed. *Cultures of Yusin: South Korea in the 1970s*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018.
- Shin, Gi-Wook. *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.
- Tudor, Daniel. *Korea: The Impossible Country—South Korea's Amazing Rise from the Ashes: The Inside Story of an Economic, Political and Cultural Phenomenon*. Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2012.

Toussaint, Eric. "South Korea: The Miracle Unmasked." *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 39 (2006): 4211-4219. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/4418764>.

Wells, Kenneth M. *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.